

Reading Poems 8

Two Poems by Elizabeth Bishop and Jorie Graham: Bridging the Modern/Postmodern Continuum

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This essay will consider two poems, ostensibly about fish, by women writing within two distinct but overlapping paradigms of the Modern-Postmodern continuum. Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), has long been considered one of the finest poets composing in the Modernist tradition, and Jorie Graham (1950~) is a highly acclaimed (and also frequently disparaged) poet writing clearly in the Postmodernist paradigm, often aligned with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement, while spanning a wide variety of poetic techniques. That being said, much recent criticism of Bishop points as well to her postmodernist tendencies, and this essay will argue that Graham's work retains much of the modernist. Indeed, this essay will attempt to demonstrate by specific references to the two poems the point made by many writings on Postmodernism that it both encompasses much of Modernism and also subverts it, much as Modernism is often viewed as an both outgrowth and a rejection of Romanticism, especially in the Whitman-Stevens-Ashbery lines of influence.

Before elaborating this theme, let us look at Bishop's poem "The Fish":

The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested

with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
— the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly —
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
— It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
— if you could call it a lip —
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up

the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels — until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

Much has been written about this poem but few would dispute that its salient feature is closely detailed natural description from which both metaphoric and metonymic devices can be found as keys to the poem's movement and message. The speaker of the poem describes in quite direct language the catching of the fish, until finally, for less than obvious reasons, she lets it go. The poem is basically about the appearance of the fish and the thoughts and feelings of the observer. Yet the speaker goes beyond this realm of pure observation-response by *imagining* (as opposed to *seeing*) the fish in its internal physiological detail as well, which she embellishes with metaphor and simile. For example, she imagines the flesh and bones, and even the entrails of the fish as she gazes on it. Obviously, this connotes the possible eating of the fish, but the detailed descriptive phrases do not suggest an appetizing repast. The similes are arresting and original; the flesh is packed in "like feathers," while the "pink swim-bladder" seems like "a big peony." Then she comes to the face and lips, from which are "growing" five big hooks, with some bits of fishing line still clinging to them. These are the marks, not merely metaphorical, of the old fish's remarkable capacity to survive. Furthermore, as she watches, the hooks and their attached strings become "medals with their ribbons," and "victory filled up the little rented boat." Then the imagery becomes transcendent, though not without irony, as the spills of oil around the boat spread outward like a rainbow, and "I let the fish go." The victory, of course, was not hers but the fish's, and one wonders if he went off with yet another medal—the sixth hook.

This poem remains firmly in the Romantic-Modernist tradition in its focus on a narrative event, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, a biographical or quasi-biographical presentation of the speaker's personal feelings about it, and its catching and freeing, in its predominance of metaphor and nature imagery, and in its uninterrupted flow and absence of disjuncture. We also find personification, in the grand Romantic tradition of attributing human qualities and feelings to nature, as for example, when Bishop describes the fish as "venerable," "sullen," and refers to "his five-haired beard of wisdom." Graham's poem shares many of these features, but blends them with a series of references that lean toward the Postmodern. Bishop's stylistic method in this poem is one she commonly employs. She writes full, syntactically correct sentences, but ones that are replete with metaphor and vivid

imagery. "Skin hung in strips/like ancient wallpaper," "shapes like full-blown roses," followed by quasi scientific descriptive phrases, "He was speckled with barnacles, /fine rosettes of lime, /and infested/with tiny white sea-lice." Bishop places us, first, in the natural world, but secondly, in a world polluted by human interference, the oil around the boat for example, that evolves, through poetic metaphor into an almost surreal natural image of a rainbow, commonly symbolizing hope, which spreads over everything, but she does so with a typically modernist irony. The fish, it seems, was that noble link to a dying world, and testimony to life's instinctive will to survive, so she lets it go. This poem, as most of Bishop's work tends to, reflects the Romantic focus on the poet's moment of epiphany, a personal moment of transcendence, though it is increasingly modulated or undermined by the irony often found in modernist poetry. Yet there remains the unspoken assumption that individual feeling and perception are worthy themes in themselves. "The Fish" seems to lie between the Romantic and the Modern, while pointing toward another, more ambiguous, perhaps ominous, future of postmodernist ambiguity.

Now to look at Jorie Graham's poem "Salmon":

Salmon

I watched them once, at dusk, on television, run,
in our motel room half-way through
Nebraska, quick, glittering, past beauty, past
the importance of beauty,
archaic,
not even hungry, not even endangered, driving deeper and deeper
into less. They leapt up falls, ladders,
and rock, tearing and leaping, a gold river,
and a blue river traveling
in opposite directions.
They would not stop, resolution of will
and helplessness, as the eye
is helpless
when the image forms itself, upside-down, backward,
driving up into
the mind, and the world
unfastens itself
from the deep ocean of the given. . . . Justice, aspen
leaves, mother attempting
suicide, the white night-flying moth
the ants dismantled bit by bit and carried in
right through the crack
in my wall. . . . How helpless
the still pool is,
upstream,
awaiting the gold blade

of their hurry. Once, indoors, a child,
 I watched, at noon, through slatted wooden blinds,
 a man and woman, naked, eyes closed,
 climb onto each other,
 on the terrace floor,
 and ride—two gold currents
 wrapping round and round each other, fastening,
 unfastening. I hardly knew
 what I saw. Whatever shadow there was in that world
 it was the one each cast
 onto the other,
 the thin black seam
 they seemed to be trying to work away
 between them. I held my breath.
 As far as I could tell, the work they did
 with sweat and light
 was good. I'd say
 they traveled far in opposite
 directions. What is the light
 at the end of the day, deep, reddish-gold, bathing the walls,
 the corridors, light that is no longer light, no longer clarifies,
 illuminates, antique, freed from the body of
 the air that carries it. What is it
 for the space of time
 where it is useless, merely
 beautiful? When they were done, they made a distance
 one from the other
 and slept, outstretched,
 on the warm tile
 of the terrace floor,
 smiling, faces pressed against the stone.

This poem is about fish only on the surface. The salmon are perceived only on television, as they pass through a Nebraska hotel room, and thus even their journey is described metaphorically, removed by one or more stages in both space and time from the physical plane. For example, they "run, in our motel room half-way through Nebraska," and they are "glittering, past beauty, /past the importance of beauty." Like Bishop's fish, Graham's salmon are described within a personal, "autobiographical" frame of reference although Bishop tells the story of a unified moment in time, while Graham's poem moves from the television screen to the childhood past of the speaker, and in its autobiographical detail, is in a sense even more personal. By "autobiographical" I do not suggest that the poem necessarily refers to the poet's own life experience but that it is *presented in the poem itself* as personal, for example, citing the mother's suicide attempt. The *modus operandi* of the narrative, however, is not a fluid chronological sequence but one that is patched together by a number of metonymic connections, in addition to several central metaphors of mating and

dying which link the salmon to the voyeuristic experience the speaker reports on from her childhood, that of human mating, followed by imagery that suggests a happy but arguably deathlike sleep. This reliance on metonymy as a major organizing device is characteristic of postmodern writing, and in this poem metonymy complements the vague strangeness of both the connections and the abrupt shifts of reference between contiguous images—in other words, the use of disjuncture.

Disjuncture, of course, is not a postmodern invention but began with Modernism, in poets such as Pound, but was carried to fully postmodern lengths as early as Gertrude Stein, where the meaning of the poem is not merely complicated by requiring creative efforts on the part of the reader but the texts themselves are often deliberately and permanently ambiguous, even meaningless, without considerable additions by the reader, who must fill in the blanks with new material. Graham's "Salmon" does not go so far, but leans toward a postmodernist use of disjuncture by moving directly from the imagery of the salmon (already once removed by television), to a digressive commentary on the world, where the eye is helpless etc., and then directly to "Justice, aspen/leaves, mother attempting /suicide." We see up to this point several examples of connection by metonymy: the helplessness of the salmon, the mother's feeling of helplessness; the gold river of the salmon's swimming, the gold blade of their hurry, the gold currents of the lovers; the image of suicide (and death) and the dismantling of the moth by ants; the uselessness again of the light of love-making, and finally, at the end of the poem, the separation and sleep upon the tile floor, referring back to the mating and death ritual of the salmon. The poem does not make most of its connections through direct metaphoric comparisons but rather through associations of both physical imagery (gold, rivers, currents) and abstractions (uselessness, passion, death).

The line between Modernism and Postmodernism is often very thin, as it is between Romanticism and Modernism. Yet the two poems we are looking at here illustrate just how subtle this distinction can be. On the surface, the poems are remarkably similar, poems written about fish by women who are among the most highly acclaimed of their respective generations. Both poems are ostensibly about the feelings and reflections the poets have about fish, and both are in somewhat different ways, philosophical in attitude. Yet the differences are more profound than the similarities. While Bishop's poem is clearly about the poet's direct experience of catching and releasing the fish, with its moment of realization and epiphany, Graham's is more ambiguous in this respect. Everything we find in Bishop's poem takes place more clearly in "real time," in that its entire content occurs within the single experience of catching the fish, and ends when the fish is released. Graham's, on the other hand, shifts in time and space, and even its surface level content leaves us with uncertainty. For example, the poem refers to a childhood observation of the couple's love making, but the subsequent reflections on the meaning of the scene are far from what a

child would be likely to be capable of. The poet writes as if all that is said about the love scene comes from the child's mind at the time of the experience, but it seems hard to believe that a child would have made such intellectualized and philosophical observations as "As far as I could tell, the work they did/with sweat and light/was good. I'd say/they traveled far in opposite/directions..." Following this there are even more abstract, philosophical comments on the experience, which indicate that the speaker's commentary seem more appropriate for an adult's viewpoint, not the mind or voice of child, witnessing for the first time, human sexual relations. Yet the language remains firmly in that moment, as if it is still the child (for no one else was there, as far as we can know) who is speaking. Furthermore, the line between references to the physical world as mere observation and speaker's mental/emotional states is often blurred. And as previously noted, the initial presence of the salmon is in actuality an "unreal," electronic image, not flesh and blood, hence, interpreted, not seen in its original, physical form.

Key to the postmodern movement in general is the principle of indeterminacy, or the impossibility of finding any unambiguous meaning in the universe. Language itself is limited and thus also is our ability to express what we know, and conversely, our ability to know more broadly. Postmodern poets often make no effort to clarify ambiguity; indeed, they create ambiguity deliberately and often the main purpose of the poem is the interplay between language use as system and its fluid relationship to the external world. The world is made of language as surely as it is made of some kind of "things" in the physical world, or even of our perceptions of the physical, which are as suspect as language.

It seems easier to say with certainty what Bishop's poem is really about and to provide intelligent conjectures and interpretations of its most probable meaning, though it is also more significantly a poem about sensory perception and feeling than it is about narrative content. Graham's poem is also about feeling, though its feelings are less coherent, more diversified in their range, and more ambiguous due to the techniques we have already alluded to here. Both poems are to some extent philosophical, but Bishop's musings are less abstract, and more clearly connected to the physical details arising from her observation of the fish. Graham's commentary on the world seem more digressive and more loosely derived from the initial description of the salmon's journey upriver to spawn. In the end it is less and less about fish, whereas Bishop's is about the state of the world through her direct and specific observation of the fish right before her eyes.

References

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